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THE PLAYS AND PLAYERS THEATRE

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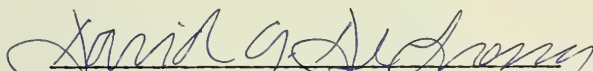
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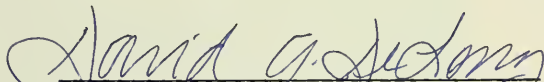
Historic Preservation

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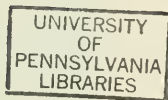
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Acknowledgements	ii
List of illustrations	iv
Introduction	1
Chapter One: The Early Years, Beulah Jay's "Little Theatre"	2
Chapter Two: Plays and Players	11
Chapter Three: Amos Barnes, An Architect for a Theater	14
Chapter Four: The Scene Changes	45
Endnotes	69
Appendix One: Wall Decorations in the Theatre of Plays and Players by Edith Emerson	72
Appendix Two: Application for Erection of New Buildings, 1714-16 Delancey Street	74
Appendix Three: Building Permit for Removal of Marquee	75
Bibliography	76

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure	Page
1. Amos W. Barnes, Dwellings to be Erected at Norristown, PA, Design #1	17
2. Amos W. Barnes, Dwellings to Erected at Norristown, PA, Design #4	18
3. Amos W. Barnes, Store Building at 937 Race Street, Philadelphia, PA,	19
4. Amos W. Barnes, Forrest Theatre, Broad and Sansom Streets, 1906	20
5. Forrest Theatre, 127 S. Broad Street, interior looking from stage	21
6. The Little Theatre as it appeared in 1913	24
7. Little Theatre 1913 entrance detail	26
8. Horizontal band facade detail	27
9. Frieze detail, Plays and Players Theatre	28
10. Detail, Luca Della Robbia, Cantoria, 1431-38 ...	29
11. Cornice detail, Plays and Players Theatre	31
12. Plays and Players Theatre lobby	33
13. 1913 auditorium interior, looking from stage ...	36
14. 1913 auditorium interior, looking toward stage .	37
15. 1913 auditorium detail	38
16. Plaster capital detail	39
17. Chandelier detail	40
18. Second floor balcony foyer	44

19.	Frieze detail, "Singers from a scroll"	46
20.	Plays and Players facade today	48
21.	The auditorium today	50
22.	Auditorium detail	51
23.	Auditorium from stage	52
24.	Auditorium looking from stage toward balcony ...	53
25.	Ladder placement on pilaster capital	55
26.	The clubroom, c. 1937	57
27.	The clubroom today	58
28.	Lounge rooms, third floor	60

INTRODUCTION

The Plays and Players Theatre at 1712-16 Delancey Street has been an important institution since its erection in 1912. Built originally as a theater and dramatic school by Beulah E. Jay, the theater was sold to its present owners, the Plays and Players organization, in 1922. This thesis will discuss the "Little Theatre's" place in Philadelphia theater history as well as the personalities associated with it. The following chapters discuss the original appearance of the theater, and then go on to show the changes to the building over time. The final chapter presents a case for the theater's preservation.

The passage of seventy-three years has taken a toll on the "Little Theatre". The building has been in continuous use since 1912; its deterioration comes not through neglect, but through loving use. Like a well-loved book whose yellowed pages are worn with use, the Plays and Players Theatre deserves another look, and some more loving attention.

CHAPTER ONE: The Early Years

The history of the American stage begins, it is reported, in Philadelphia, when a company of players organized in 1749.¹ Other accounts would place the date as early as 1686, when the city had street fairs with dancing and performers.² The first building to be used as a theater in Philadelphia was a converted warehouse, owned by William Plumstead on Water Street near Lombard. A David Douglass erected the first specifically constructed theater building in 1759 near what was then Vernon and Cedar Streets, between Front and Second; it was known as the Society Hill Theatre.³

By 1837, there were seven theaters listed in city directories, among them the Walnut Street Theatre at Ninth and Walnut Streets.⁴ It is hard to say exactly how many theater buildings there have been in the city. Theaters burn down, change names, or are adapted to other uses. A 1900 survey lists nineteen theaters having been destroyed by fire since 1799.⁵

Theaters were built in response to the growing population of the city in the nineteenth century. The city was capable of supporting many theaters, each of which undoubtedly catered to its own audience. The Academy of Music alone

hosted 25 operas, 25 dramas, and 31 concerts in the year 1877. ⁶

By 1884, the city boasted eighteen theaters. Some of these were Legitimate houses, others were Burlesque or Vaudeville theaters. ⁷ In 1905, the number of theaters had jumped to thirty three. ⁸ A large immigrant population and a lack of other forms of entertainment here helped support this large number of theaters.

Philadelphia had its share of native actors too. Edwin Forrest made his home in Philadelphia, as did John Drew and Joseph Jefferson. While these names may sound unfamiliar to modern audiences, they were common to theater goers of the early nineteenth century.

Philadelphia was part of the theatrical circuit which included New York, London and Boston. Philadelphia was the host to many premier performances, too; the opera "Norma" was first produced in this country in Philadelphia on the 11th of January, 1841. ¹⁰

The history of the Plays and Players is an interesting chapter in the annals of Philadelphia theater history. It tells us not only of the city's artistic endeavors but of its social character as well. Beulah E. Jay, founder of the Metropolitan Dramatic School, was the woman responsible for building "The Little Theatre" as it was first called. A

native of Boston, Mrs. Jay studied opera at the New England Conservatory of Music. From there she went to New York to study Dramatic Arts and acted with several professional companies before marrying Edward G. Jay. 11 Upon moving to Philadelphia, Beulah Jay opened the Metropolitan Dramatic School. 12 A 1912 City Directory lists the school's address as 103 South 15th Street. The 1913 edition gives 1214 Delancey Street as the address for the school. Apparently the school enjoyed some success as new quarters were required; land was purchased on Delancey Street for the erection of the new Dramatic School and Theatre.

Also instrumental in the building of the theater was F.H. Shelton, acquaintance of Mr. and Mrs. Jay and member of the amateur theatre group, Plays and Players. Shelton would eventually buy the building from Beulah Jay, and then sell it to the Plays and Players organization. Philadelphia architect Amos Barnes was chosen to design the new theater.

The Delancey Street property consisted of three parcels of land with a combined frontage of 48 feet, extending in depth 92 feet to Panama Street. 1712 Delancey had belonged to Thomas Wanamaker. At one time, the parcels at 1714 and 1716 were combined and owned by a Robert B. Sterling. Beulah Jay bought both properties within a month of each other; June 3, 1912 is the date on the deed for the property at 1714-16, and May 8 on the 1712 property.

Mrs. Jay acted quickly. By the 20th of June, Amos Barnes had completed a set of drawings for the new theater.¹³ On the 28th of June, contractors were estimating the cost of the project. The contract was finally awarded to the firm of F.A. Havens and Company; the building was estimated to cost \$35,000.¹⁴ The 1700 block of Delancey Street was perhaps the easiest place to assemble such a large parcel of land for a reasonable price in the Rittenhouse Square neighborhood. This street was the secondary access for the larger and more fashionable Spruce Street residences, a block of stables, back doors and modest homes. This section of Delancey Street was called Cox Street in an 1862 Atlas.¹⁵ By 1874, the street is listed as De Lancey Street.¹⁶ In 1941, the city changed the spelling to Delancey, and the street became a "place" instead. Somehow, the pretentious "place" didn't stick, and the street is referred to as Delancey Street today.¹⁷

Opening night for the Little Theatre was March third, 1913. The piece selected for the opening was a comedy in five episodes, "The Adventures of Chlora," starring the ingenue Oza Waldrop as the heroine. In the course of the show Chlora encountered several men with whom she flirted. She meets an aviator who has fallen through a skylight into her boudoir, a military officer whom she meets in a ruined abbey,

a Viennese bachelor, a business man, and a summer man (no description is given of this so-called "summer man.")¹⁸

The last episode, involving the "summer man" received some attention from reviewers. Apparently Chlora was discovered on the shores of the Adriatic by the "summer man" in a rowboat. As the scene progressed, the water seemed to rise, forcing Chlora into the boat. The effect of the water rising was apparently quite convincing to one reviewer, who commented about it at length. ¹⁹

By 1913, the number of theaters had swollen to forty three, and elsewhere in Philadelphia that same evening, theater goers were treated to a variety of entertainments. Annie Russell was starring in "She Stoops to Conquer" at the Adelphia Theatre at Broad and Cherry; "The Merry Countess" at the Lyric contained "more tantalizing and tuneful music than any of the other productions;" The Walnut Theatre had "The Old Homestead" on the boards, a homespun, wholesome story; the reputed actor George Arliss was in his second week of "Disraeli" at the Broad Street Theatre.

The Vaudeville houses presented equally spicy fare. The Nixon at 52nd and Market Streets was playing "Scandal," "the tense dramatic playlet that has turned all towns talking," and "The Models DeLuxe," "the pinnacle of picturesque posing." Elsewhere, at B.F. Keith's at Eleventh and Chestnut, audiences could view the new Kinetophone talking motion pic-

tures, along with several dramatic playlets, musical numbers, and a "daring motorcycle race in a cone-shaped structure."

And of course there were the Burlesque theaters with all those beautiful girls. The Empire at Broad and Fairmount Avenue advertised the "whirl of mirth" with Eddie Collins and "many other highclass funmakers." The Trocadero at 10th and Arch had "the Dandy Girls," along with "Mexican Athletes." The music was promised to be "of the exhilarating kind."

Dumont's minstrels at Ninth and Arch featured "the Return of the Suffragettes from Washington," humorous skits and musical numbers, all for ten to fifty cents for an evening's performance! The Little Theatre's \$1.50 and \$2.00 prices seem high in comparison.

In a more serious vein, one could have heard Burton Holmes give an travelogue lecture on Panama at the Academy of Music. Later that week at the Academy, Leopold Stokowski was conducting Stanford's "Irish" Symphony. ²⁰

Audiences had a wide variety of theatrical fare to choose from. The best actors and shows came from New York to Philadelphia and B.F. Keith's Vaudeville circuit was famous throughout the country. The city was a major east coast entertainment center. The Little Theatre was opening to sophisticated audiences and stiff competition.

Philadelphia theater goers were treated to an ambitious

first season. Among the Little Theatre's productions during the opening season were Ibsen's "Ghosts," Oscar Wilde's comedy "The Importance of Being Earnest," as well as a number of less known one act plays, and new works. The Little Theatre was also host to several prominent actors such as Brandon Tynan, Edward Horton, Jr., Rebecca Warren and Kathryn Tyndall. 21

The Metropolitan Drama School had moved to its new larger quarters housed in the theatre building. Managed by Beulah Jay, the school's purpose was to teach dramatics to students who were pursuing professional theatrical careers or who were theatrical enthusiasts.

The Little Theatre blended professional and amateur talent. Musicians from the Philadelphia Orchestra often played for productions, and local actors and actresses performed alongside seasoned oldtimers.22

Beulah Jay's dream of owning a theater a Dramatic School had become a reality. One senses, however, that her dream was perhaps being tested against a harsh reality.

F.H. Shelton, Beulah Jay's business associate, bought the playhouse from Mrs. Jay in November of 1914, only eight months after the curtain first went up on the new stage. A 1914 program reveals some of the trials the theater was experiencing during its experimental beginnings. Beulah Jay arranged for German and French players to perform on special

subscription evenings as well as regular performances. It was found that revivals of proven plays and comedies were popular among Philadelphia audiences. The new season would see fifteen plays produced at two-week intervals. On nights when the plays were not shown, special productions by outside players were to be performed. A lecture series was also planned, featuring prominent actors, authors, critics and producers. The Little Theatre was an independent enterprise, unallied with theatrical syndicates or established producing firms. It seems as if Beulah Jay intended to keep the theater lit every night no matter what the program. 23

The presence of a dramatic school in one of Philadelphia's most elite neighborhoods is not startling; Mrs. Jay's concept was timely indeed. Philadelphia's leisure class would welcome yet another diversion. What was for some a drawing room past-time was being legitimized, moving into the ranks of semi-professional theater. The lectures, professional actors, and play selections would seem to have spelled certain success for Philadelphia's philanthropic impresario.

Mrs. Jay continued to be the director of the Little Theatre after its sale to F.H. Shelton. A new person arrived on the scene, however, a Mr. H.T. Dougherty, who assumed the position of manager. Mr. Dougherty's name appeared on the theater's programs for several seasons. Mrs. Jay still held

the position of director. Finally, in 1920, a final blow was struck to Beulah Jay's dream. The theater, while still owned by Shelton, was to be managed by the Shuberts.

Philadelphia is to have another "First Class" playhouse. The Little Theatre at 17th and Delancey Streets renamed the Delancey Street Theater. This time -- and really for the first time it is to come under competent management.²⁴

This was the fifth Philadelphia theater to come under the Shuberts' control.

Beulah and Edward Jay lived on Oak Lane and 69th Street when the Little Theatre was built. Later city directories list their address as 1722 Delancey Street, two doors down from the theater. Beulah Jay continued to list the Metropolitan Dramatic School, naming herself as director until 1919, when the school was not listed. The Jay's address, however, is the address of the theater. In 1921 Beulah and Edward Jay are not to be found in the directories under any heading. The Little Theatre is listed in '21, but no names are given with this entry. It is not until 1923 that the theater at 1714 Delancey Street is listed as Plays and Players.

CHAPTER TWO: Plays and Players

The Plays and Players organization was founded in 1911. From the club's beginning there was a link with Beulah Jay's endeavors with the Metropolitan Dramatic School and Little Theatre, and Plays and Players. F.H. Shelton, Beulah Jay's business associate, was a member of the Plays and Players organization. Mrs. W. Yorke Stevenson, (Christina Wetherill) was another prominent member of Plays and Players who appeared in several of the Little Theatre's productions. One notable example was the play "Sister Beatrice" where Mrs. Stevenson translated the work from French to English, and starred in the leading role. Plays and Players would, during the days of Beulah Jay's proprietorship, rent the Little Theatre for some of its productions. Their main clubhouse and stage was at Number 43, South Eighteenth Street, where they remained until the purchase of the Little Theatre in 1922. Mrs. Otis Skinner, wife and mother to two famed thespians, Otis Skinner and Cornelia Otis Skinner, was the club's first president. She and Christina Wetherill were founding members of the Philadelphia Art Alliance.

Membership in Plays and Players was exclusive; an elaborate pecking order determined a member's standing in the club. The club seems to have been an elaborate diversion for Philadelphia's monied inhabitants; it is not surprising that

the members of Plays and Players and the Art Alliance were virtually the same group of people.

Membership was divided into three categories: active members, associate players and associate members. The associate members provided most of the financial support to the organization. The active members provided the talent for the group; some had acted professionally at one time, others were stage-struck amateurs. The associate players were those who had not passed the requirements to be considered active members. They were employed as supernumeraries in productions, or took part in the organizations private shows.

All the performances were given for charitable purposes. The decision of which charity to give to was made by a committee of the associate members. While the organization may have been elitist, they were nonetheless philanthropic. 25

Plays and Players soon outgrew their headquarters at 43 South Eighteenth Street and bought the Little Theatre at 1714 Delancey Street. F.H. Shelton, owner of the theater building and member of Plays and Players sold it to the Plays and Players organization in 1922.

Plays and Players has occupied the building since the purchase. The club has staged several notable productions, some of which have gone beyond Philadelphia's audiences, such as "The Show-Off" and "Stalag 17". The club produces four or

more productions a year along with children's theater productions and a theater workshop series.²⁶

Membership to Plays and Players has changed over the years also. No longer the elitist, restrictive club it once was, club membership is open to anyone who applies, with written letters of recommendation from a proposer and second-er who are members of the club in good standing. 27

Plays and Players also rents out its theater facility and club rooms to outside groups such as the Philadelphia Company, the Gilbert and Sullivan Players, the Pennsylvania Opera Theater and the Curtis Institute, among others.

CHAPTER THREE: Amos Barnes, an Architect for a Theater

Amos Barnes was the architect chosen for Beulah Jay's new theater. Born in 1867 in Brooklyn, New York, Amos Barnes studied at New York University where he received his Bachelor of Science and Civil Engineering degrees in 1885. His first engineering jobs kept him close to his Brooklyn home, working for railroad companies. It was a time of great expansion in the railroad business, and a young engineer could easily find work.

Barnes moved to Chicago where he worked for the Union Elevated Railway and the South Side Rapid Transit Railway. Barnes was unmarried at this time in his life. Barnes moved East again in 1889 to work for the Pencoyd Iron Works at Pencoyd, Pennsylvania in the bridge and construction department. He remained there for four years before moving to Philadelphia in 1893 to open his own civil engineering office. From 1896 to 1899, Barnes assumed the position of Engineer of the Bureau of Building Inspection in Philadelphia, but resumed his private practice after that.

Barnes married Sarah Missimer on June 3, 1897. By 1902, the couple had three children, Mary, Amos and Sidney. The Barnes family had lived at Wissahickon, Philadelphia and later moved to Norristown, Pennsylvania.²⁸

Amos Barnes appears to have been a socially concerned citizen as well. He was school director in the twenty-first ward of Philadelphia, and was a member of the Masonic Order, a philanthropic fraternal organization. Barnes also donated a large parcel of land to Norristown near the area of Elmwood Park. 29

Barnes is listed as an engineer in the city directories until 1905, when he began listing himself as an architect. He never really gave up his early title however, as later drawings done by him have "Civil Engineer and Architect" printed in the title block.

Barnes was a versatile designer. His work ranged from industrial buildings to commercial and residential commissions. His designs reflect the tastes of the time; one would be hard-pressed to call Barnes an architectural innovator. Judging by the amount of work that passed over his desk though, it would appear that his practice was rather successful. Barnes was capable of addressing a number of architectural problems with proficiency and a well-developed aesthetic sense. In 1904, for instance, he designed forty residences in Ardmore, Pennsylvania, several storefronts, a carding factory, and an office building, among other commissions. 30 In 1907, Barnes drew plans for dwellings in Norristown. Each drawing is labeled with a number. Each was a double house, essentially the same in plan, with the variety found

in the elevation. [Figures 1 and 2] One was a half-timbered Tudor Revival, another a Colonial Revival with a gambrel roof and broken pediments over the windows.³¹

In a later design of 1910, Barnes demonstrated his ability with commercial structures. The store building at 937 Race Street [Figure 3] makes use of a metal cornice and brick patterning for ornament, both of which he used again in designing the Little Theatre. The paneled parapet wall and denticulated cornice adumbrate the Little Theatre's cornice and parapet detailing.

Barnes designed at least one theater before doing Beulah Jay's Little Theatre. His 1906 Forrest Theatre (now demolished) at Broad and Sansom Streets was part of a larger block of stores. The narrow, rusticated terra cotta facade had a flat arch, festoons and garlands. The Forrest Theater facade was typical to many theater facades of the day with their arched, gateway motifs. [Figure 4]

The interior of the Forrest Theatre, as shown in a perspective seating diagram drawing, relied on a classical vocabulary. [Figure 5] Paired corinthian pilasters frame the box seats. There is an orchestra seating section, and two balconies. The sketch also shows an elaborate cornice and decorated ceiling with a chandelier. In the orchestra level is a balustrade running around the perimeter of the room.

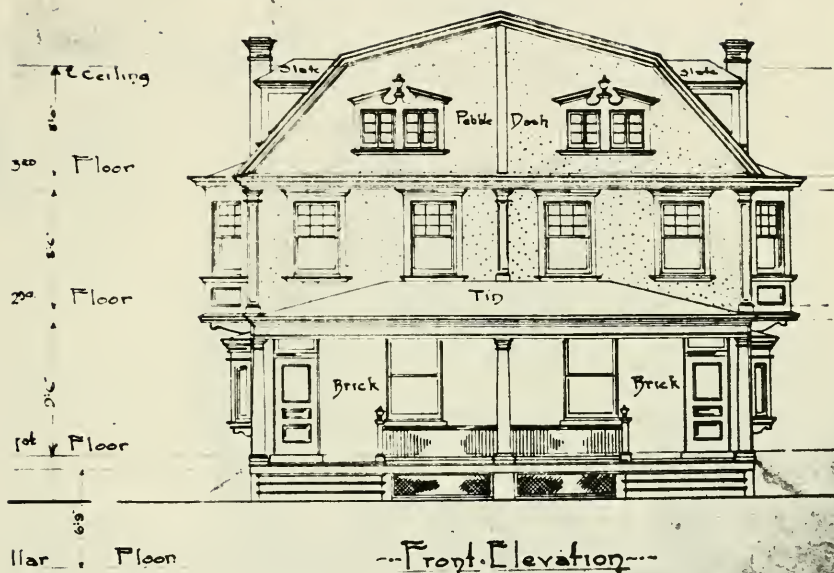


Figure 1

Amos W. Barnes, Dwellings to be erected at Norristown Park, PA, January 17, 1907. Design #1
 Photograph courtesy of the Athenaeum of Philadelphia, Philadelphia PA, Amos W. Barnes File

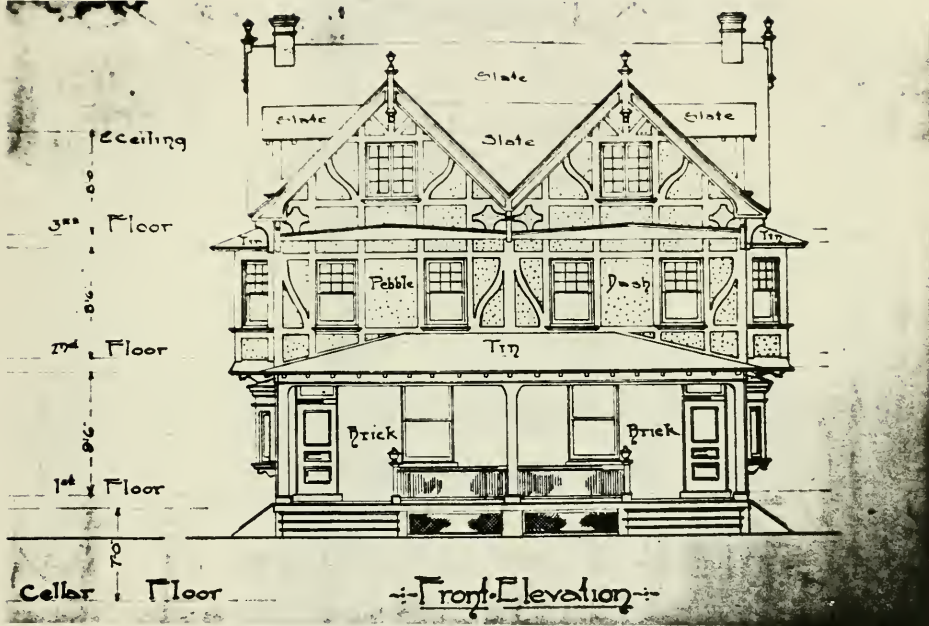


Figure 2
 Amos W. Barnes, Dwellings to be erected at Norristown Park,
 PA, January 17, 1907. Design #4
 Photograph courtesy of the Athenaeum of Philadelphia, Phila-
 delphia PA, Amos W. Barnes File

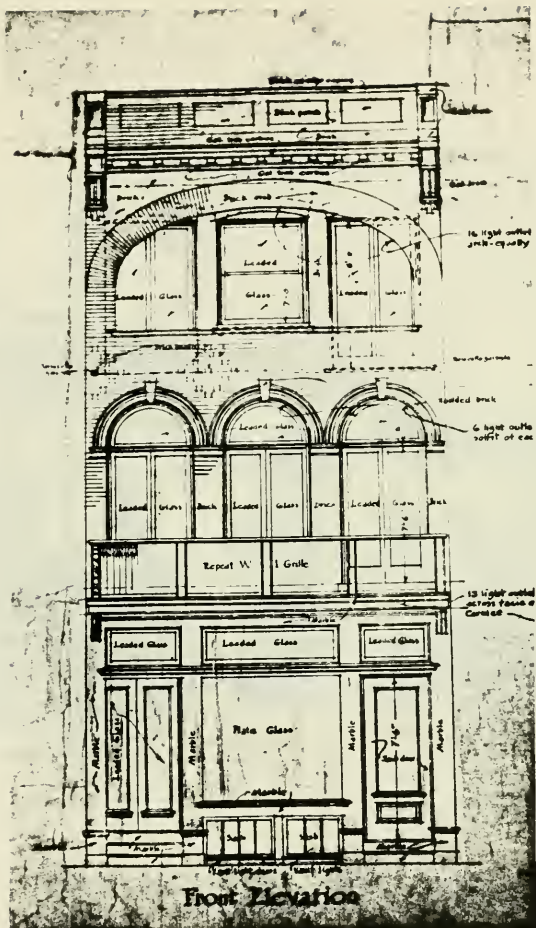


Figure 3
 Amos W. Barnes, Store Building at 937 Race Street, Philadelphia
 Front elevation, April 16, 1910
 Photograph courtesy of the Athenaeum of Philadelphia, Philadelphia PA, Amos W. Barnes File



Figure 4
Amos W. Barnes, Forrest Theater, Broad and Sansom Streets,
1906 (now demolished)
1916 photography courtesy of the Philadelphia Historical
Commission, photograph #3539

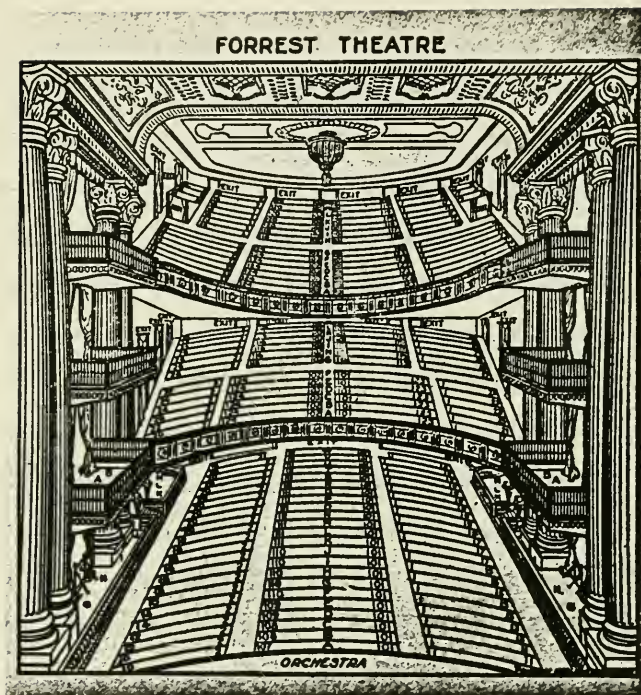


Figure 5
Amos Barnes, Forrest Theater, 127 S. Broad Street, 1906
Interior, looking from stage.
From Wanamaker Diary, 1911, p. 48.

The Forrest commission was an important one for Barnes. He had experience designing churches, halls, and clubrooms, but never a full scale theater. The commission also put him very much in the public eye. The location at Broad and Sansom Streets was quite prominent, just a few blocks from the famous Academy of Music. A newspaper ad from the period billed the Forrest as "Philadelphia's Handsomest Theatre."

33 Designing the Forrest Theatre more than prepared Amos Barnes for his upcoming work on Beulah Jay's Little Theatre.

Ground was broken in June of 1912 for the Little Theatre. Amos Barnes had assistance from all fronts in this endeavor. Mrs. Jay oversaw all the decorative aspects of the interior, choosing the wall coverings, draperies and color scheme for her classically inspired theater. 34 The dichotomy expressed by the lobby of the theater and the auditorium suggest the work of two very different designers. One opening night reviewer described the interior as being decorated in dark shades of brown. The pilasters were a chocolate color, and the intermediate tapestried wall coverings were done in tints of brown with a figured design. The ceiling was painted in cream and buff shades. The proscenium was of the same dark brown as the pilasters. The stage curtain was green velvet. Mention was also made by this reviewer of the globular lamps, suspended from the side walls, and the chandelier. These are still extant. 35

F.H. Shelton and Mr. Jay also assisted Amos Barnes. Both men were engineers; their professional services proved to be useful. The theater had some of the most modern equipment of the day. The fly gallery rose three stories above the stage; an intricate system of ropes, pulleys and counter weights controlled scenery flats. A painting bridge, a cat walk used to paint large scenery flats, was also located in this space. A fire curtain separated the stage from the rest of the auditorium. A water tank was located above the stage for fire protection. The theater also had a projection booth for showing films located in the balcony. Technically speaking, the theater was and is a fine theatrical facility.

One wonders if Barnes had worked with either Shelton or Jay before this joint effort on the theater. A previous professional relationship would help explain Barnes' getting the commission.

The theater building presents an interesting juxtaposition of styles and treatment. The tall, symmetrically balanced facade is divided by strong horizontal bands. Beige tapestry brick is the predominant material used. [Figure 6] The main entrance was accentuated by the use of an elaborate marquee (the original is missing) supported by chains held in the mouths of lions. The brick patterning

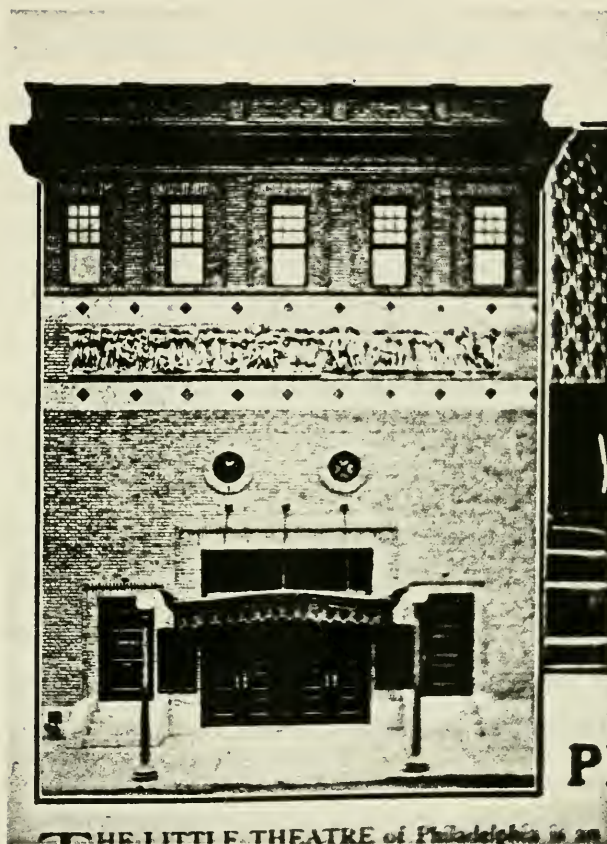


Figure 6

The Little Theatre as it appeared in 1913

From Herman L. Dieck, "Philadelphia's Little Theatre," The Theatre vol XVII, no. 150 (August 1913), p. 61.

around the entrance accentuates the door. This central pavilion is flanked by two smaller doors. [Figure 7] Above this composition are two small round windows in a quatrefoil design. The most outstanding feature of the facade is the terra cotta frieze below the third floor windows. Horizontal bands of herringbone patterned terra cotta tile frame the relief sculpture. Decorative tiles depicting the masks of comedy and tragedy, a triscele, and an ankh. Both symbols of Life, Revival, and prosperity and a mermaid and a lion are among the symbols used in this horizontal pattern. [Figure 8]

The frieze is an exact copy of Luca Della Robbia's Cantoria (1431-38) preserved in the Opera del Duomo in Florence. It illustrates Psalm 150, a spirited hymn of praise with reference made to praising the Lord with trumpets, harp, timbrel and dance, with stringed instruments and organs and cymbals, "Let everything that hath breath praise the Lord." The frieze fairly well depicts this joyous activity. [Figures 9 and 10]

The treatment of the drapery, the positioning of the figures, and facial expressions are accurate reproductions of the original Cantoria. Unlike Luca Della Robbia, the figures are not contained within pilasters or columns. Each of the terra cotta panels abuts the next, making a continuous



Figure 7
Little Theatre 1913 Entrance Detail from The Theater, volume
XVIII, no. 150, August 1913, p. 61.
Compare with Figure 20 showing contemporary marquee



Figure 8
Horizontal Band Facade Detail
Photograph by David Harrington, 1985

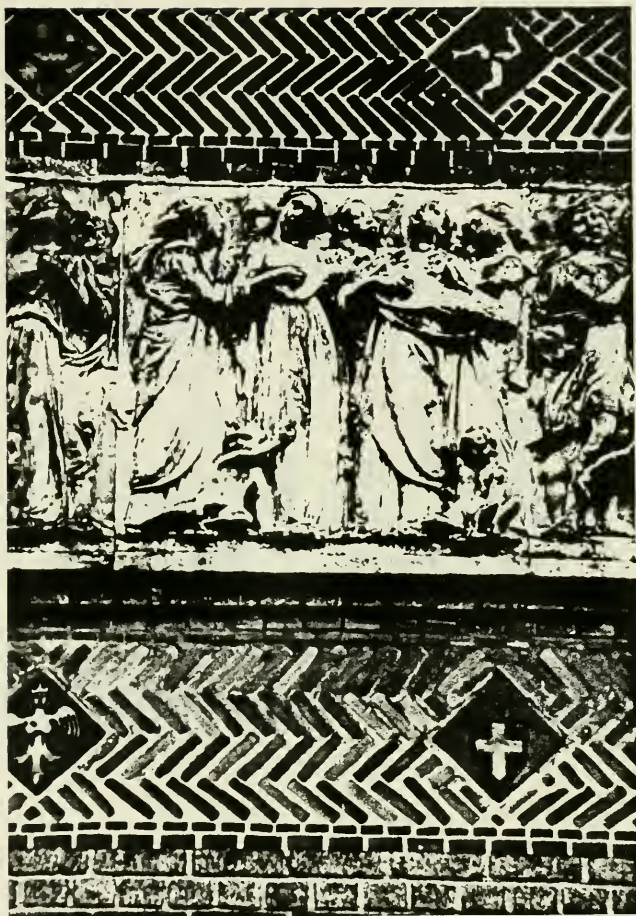


Figure 9
Frieze detail, Plays and Players Theatre
Photo: David Harrington, 1985



Figure 10
 Detail, Luca Della Robbia, Cantoria (1431-38) Opera del
 Duomo, Florence, Italy from Maud Cruttwell, Luca and Andrea
 Della Robbia and their Successors (NewYork: E.P. Dutton &
 Company, 1902), n.p.
 The Cantoria illustrates Psalm 150

band of figures. The figures are restrained only by the patterned horizontal terra cotta above and below them.

The figures in the foreground are done in high relief, arms and legs thrust out into space. Skimpy togas seem to blow in the wind. Behind this projecting plane of figures are more actors in this terra cotta cast. These are rendered in a lower relief than those in the foreground, but with the same attention to detail. Finally, the figures in the background barely poke into the third dimension. The whole effect is quite convincing, as these figures dance, their scant tunics seemingly tossed by the breeze.

Atop this strong horizontal element are five windows, which form an interesting composition with the frieze below. Symmetrically placed, the windows are accentuated through the use of brick patterning, similar to that of the doors below. The original nine over one composition of lights (now missing) is typical of Queen Anne and Arts and Crafts window treatments. A heavy, projecting, denticulated copper cornice further emphasizes the horizontality of the facade. This is topped by a brick parapet wall. [Figure 11]

While the composition employs a largely classicizing vocabulary, there is a strong influence from the Arts and Crafts tradition. The textured tapestry brick is laid in the English bond. Brick patterns accentuate the architectural forms. The use of terra cotta tiles, each with its



Figure 11
Cornice Detail
Photo: David Harrington, 1985

accompanying symbolic meaning, is typical of the Arts and Crafts tradition.

Barnes' work is not unlike many of his contemporary theater architects. Like other theaters which are housed in separate buildings, as opposed to theaters which share a building with offices, the facade is symmetrical. Thomas W. Lamb, noted theater architect of the early twentieth century, uses many of the same elements that Amos Barnes did. His Eltinge Theater in New York has a symmetrically arranged facade with an imposing arched entrance. There is a strong horizontality to the composition with the projecting modillioned cornice topped by a band of windows. 36 Lamb's Washington Theater, also in New York, uses tapestry brick and terra cotta on the facade. 37 Barnes' use of similar materials would suggest his familiarity with Thomas Lamb's work.

Upon entering the theater lobby, one finds the same buff colored tapestry brick as is used on the facade. The ceramic tile floor is set in a geometric pattern, its tan color harmonizing with the walls. Glazed tiles are used to form a decorative horizontal band in the lobby. Like the exterior, the tile symbolize theatrical themes. [Figure 12]

The lobby is symmetrical with the side walls mirroring one another. Stairs to the upper balcony are on each side,



Figure 12

Theater lobby showing use of English bond tapestry brick and decorative tile work. The door on the right is the main auditorium entrance. The door to the left leads to the second floor and balcony. Note the acoustical tile on the ceiling.

Photo: David Harrington, 1985

and brick frames for theatrical posters are set into the wall beyond the stair opening. Ticket offices oppose one another. A central door opposite the main entrance leads to the main auditorium. Two small hallways to the right and left of the door go to the side aisles of the theater. The twin ticket offices are shown on the original floor-plans, however one is labelled as a coat room. The space is very small and it is easy to understand why the room isn't used as a coat room by the current occupants.

Metal sconces provide lighting for the lobby. Marbled glass in warm tones of yellows and browns is held between a hammered wrought iron frame. These hand-made looking lighting fixtures reinforce the Arts and Crafts feeling of this portion of the building.

The lobby is unlike many theater lobbies of the period. Gone is the ornate plaster ornament, the gilding and highly ornamented ceiling. Rather, we see a subdued treatment, a calm entrance into a small intimate theater. Barnes is subtle in his treatment of the lobby. A herringbone brick patterning, like that of the facade, is carried around as a cornice detail. Through his use of materials, Barnes has linked the interior and exterior spaces, making for a smooth transition from outside to inside. The muted tones do not call one's attention. The tiles tell a story. A similar treatment can be found in the National Theater in the Bronx

by Neville and Bagge. Here, we see the same articulation of surfaces with tapestry brick and terra cotta tile. ³⁸

The theater auditorium is treated in a very classical, more traditional manner than the Arts and Crafts lobby. [Figures 13, 14, 15, and 16] The juxtaposition is striking. Classical Corinthian pilasters in pairs surround the room, supporting a highly detailed plaster cornice. An oval garland of plaster runs around the perimeter of the ceiling. A center circular medallion of plaster is surrounded by twelve lights with ribbed glass globes, supported by heavy brass chains. [Figure 17] The walls were originally covered in a brocaded fabric, the lower third being wood paneling. They are now covered with murals by artist Edith Emerson. The murals, signed by the artist, and dated 1918, depict the Legend of Dionysos. (see appendix) Miss Emerson is also credited with the mural of the U.S. Library of Congress. ³⁹

The auditorium is small: total seating capacity is three hundred twenty four persons, two hundred thirty eight on the first floor and eighty six in the balcony. The auditorium floor slopes down toward the stage, giving every seat an unobstructed view of the stage. The stage occupies the southern third of the building. The proscenium opening, flanked by fluted pilasters, dominates the south wall of the auditorium. The orchestra pit extends from under the

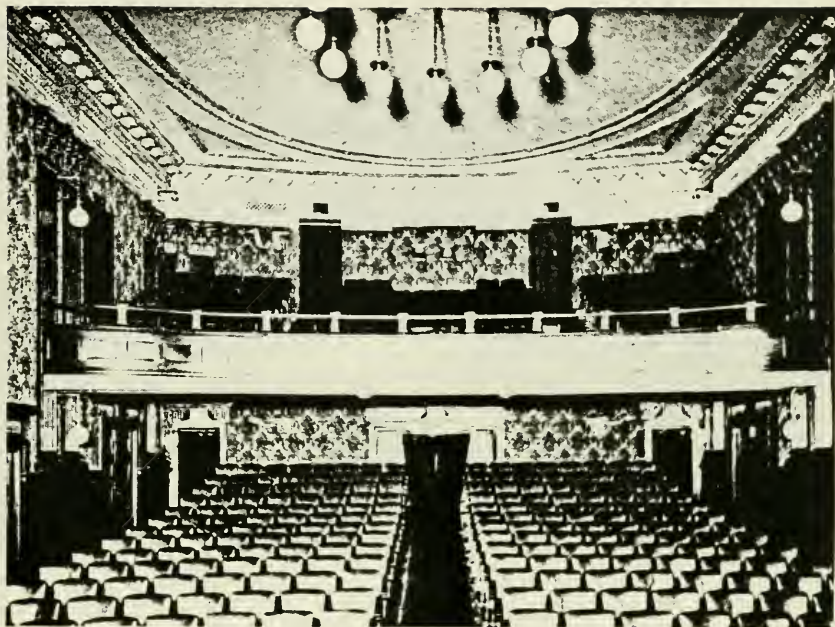


Figure 13
Auditorium interior, 1913, from The Theater, volume XVIII,
no. 150, August 1913, p. 61.

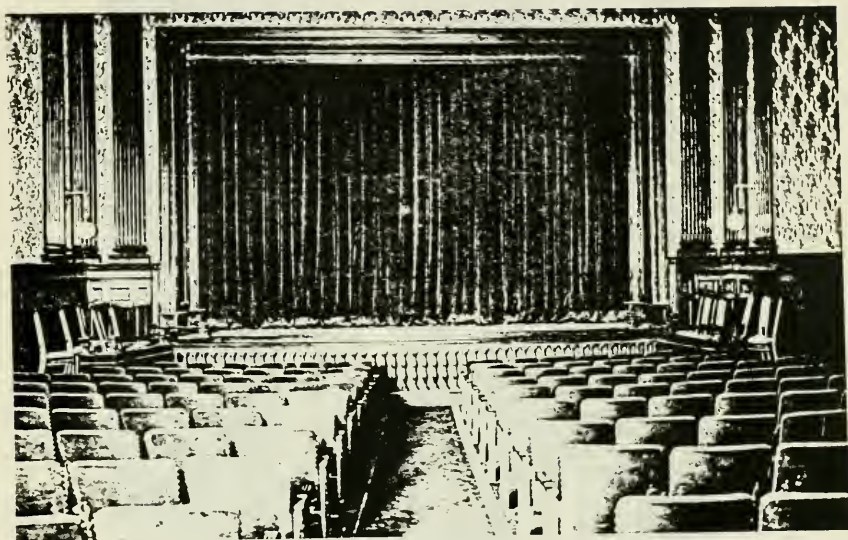


Figure 14
Auditorium interior, 1913, from The Theater, volume XVIII,
no. 150, August 1913, p. 61.

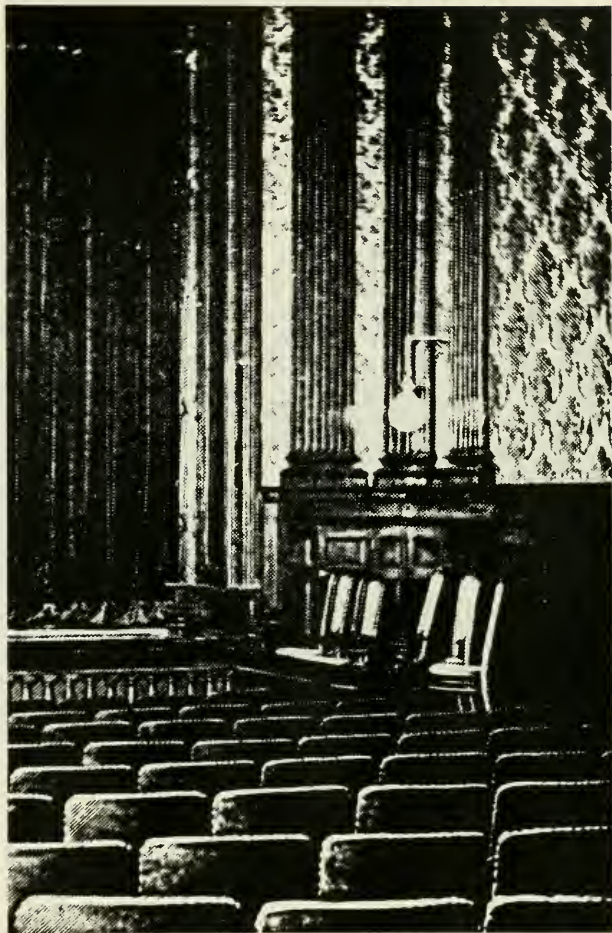


Figure 15

Detail. Note the dark-colored woodwork and figured wall tapestry. The seats were upholstered using brass tacks. From The Theater, volume XVIII, no. 150, August 1913, p. 61.

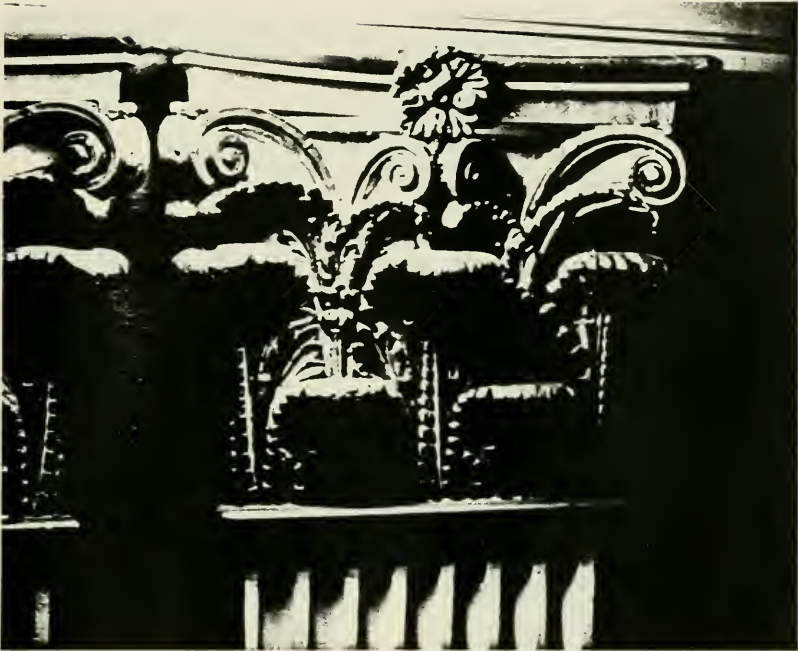


Figure 16
Plaster capital detail
Photo: David Harrington, 1985

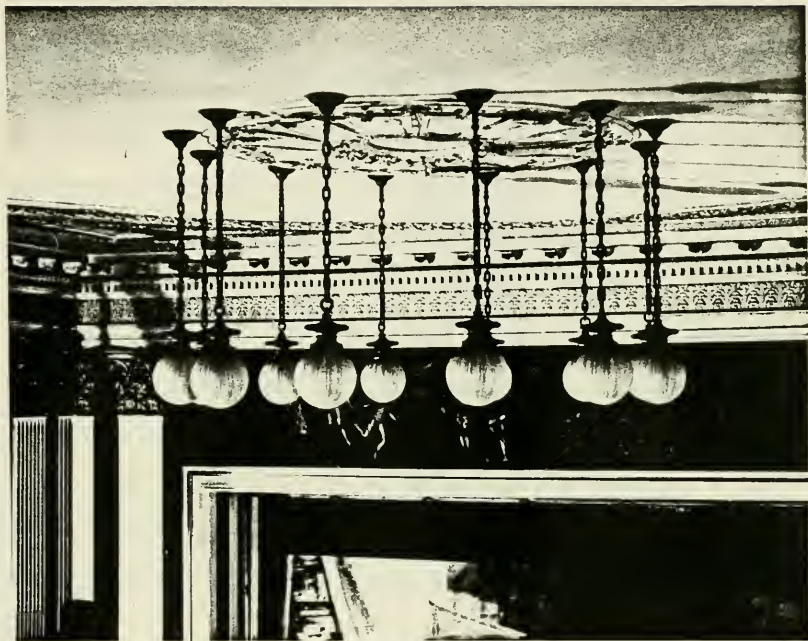


Figure 17
Chandelier detail
Photo: David Harrington, 1985

apron of the stage. A balustrade originally masked the pit from the audience's view, but has been replaced with a makeshift curtain on a brass rail. Two boxes, or platforms, flank the stage and orchestra pit.

Lighting fixtures extend from the walls between the paired pilasters, with the same ribbed globes as those found in the ceiling fixture. The auditorium was originally outfitted for both gas and electric illumination, gas being the secondary source. Gas jets are still in place below the electrical fixtures, and are visible in old photographs.

The balcony extends the width of the auditorium's northern end. A curving paneled gallery topped by a railing with paneled posts reinforces the oval ceiling motif, as well as the slightly curving wall in the rear of the balcony.

Doors in the auditorium are capped with entablatures with strigil ornamentation. Recessed glass exit signs are placed mid point in the plaster design. As the 1913 photographs show, all the exit doors originally had portiers; the hardware is still in place. The balcony doors are now the only ones missing the portiers. A set of double doors, flanked by small windows, is the primary entrance from the lobby to the auditorium space.

The auditorium interior is more typical of traditional theater interiors. The decorative plaster cornice, ceilings

and columns are what one expected to find in a theater. The auditorium has an intimate scale, and Barnes has treated the interior elements with sensitivity. More plaster decoration would have overwhelmed this room. It is perhaps Barnes' sense of scale that makes the auditorium so successful.

Recalling his Forrest Theater, Barnes again used paired pilasters to articulate the wall surfaces. The ceiling of both the Forrest and the Little Theatre were decorated. In the case of the Little Theatre, Barnes has omitted the side boxes; the auditorium is not large enough to accomodate them. Barnes has redefined his Forrest Theater in the Little Theatre. He has scaled it down to a smaller size, and done it quite successfully.

The auditorium must have had quite a different feeling when it was decorated in a monochromatic color scheme of dark browns, creams and buff shades as described in the opening night review. The transition from the lobby to the auditorium would have been smoother as both spaces had similar color schemes.

The basement level houses the dressing rooms, Green room, public rest rooms, a small scene shop, and rooms for mechanical equipment. These rooms have little architectural interest, except for the wainscotting of the Green Room, and the glazed white tiles in the rest rooms. The orchestra pit

is accessible from the basement level. A spiral stair leads from the basement up into the fly gallery three stories above. There is also a second stair leading from the scene shop to the stage.

The balcony foyer on the second floor is small. Access is by either of two stairs leading up from the lobby. The theater office is located in this foyer. A curved glazed partition wall encloses the office and wood mullions separate industrial textured glass. The curved glass partition is supported by wood wainscotting. This floor to ceiling partition is perhaps the most interesting architectural element in the foyer. [Figure 18]

The third floor club rooms are reached from the second floor foyer. These rooms have a truly domestic scale and feeling to them. These were the rooms intended for Beulah Jay's "Metropolitan Dramatic School." Barnes' 1912 drawings show a lounge, school office, private office, Assembly Hall, classroom, make up room, and rest room on this floor. The fly-loft occupies the rear position of this floor, and is not accessible except by a shared fire escape. Simple moldings surround windows and doors. A baseboard and picture molding add to the domestic flavor of this space. Sliding paneled pocket doors separate the lounge from the office, Assembly Hall, and classroom. A maple floor is in the Assembly Hall; other floors have been carpeted.



Figure 18
Second floor balcony foyer
Photo: David Harrington, 1985

CHAPTER FOUR: The Scene Changes

The Plays and Players Theatre has changed remarkably little through the years. The building continues to serve its original function as a theater, hence no major structural changes have been necessary. What changes have occurred have been related to maintaining a safe environment for the public and keeping the building in sound condition. Some of the changes have not made a significant difference to the building's overall character, other changes have.

The facade, like many brick facades in an urban environment, is dirty. The accumulation of grime has not obscured the details, however, and there does not appear to be noticeable deterioration of the masonry. The frieze needs a closer inspection than this reporter was able to give, though I was able to observe some deterioration through a telephoto camera lens. Though cursory, it did provide some information. Given the nature of the frieze -- three dimensional terra cotta figures exposed to the elements -- one can surmise that a certain amount of deterioration has occurred. One portion depicting "Singers from a scroll" on the far left of the frieze is deteriorated. [Figure 19] The scroll, held between two figures, is a flat, thin piece of exposed terra cotta held in a horizontal position, thereby making it vulnerable to attack by the elements. A form wire



Figure 19

Freize detail, "Singers from a Scroll". Note deterioration of scroll.

Photo: David Harrington, 1985

is exposed, and will deteriorate more. Other of the figures have years of accumulated dirt on them; a closer inspection would be needed to determine the amount of deterioration to the terra cotta.

The marquee is not original to the building. A building permit dated 1954 was for the purpose of removing it. The original marquee had a sloping profile with acroterions accentuating the corners. Vertical glass panels surrounded the perimeter cut in an ornamental fashion. The marquee was supported by three chains, held in the mouths of three lions heads. [See figure 7] The lions heads and chains are still in place. The modern marquee is much simpler and less elaborate. [Figure 20]

The third floor club room windows were changed from a nine-over-one configuration to a one-over-one. The new windows have metal frames with a narrow profile. The change affects the modulation of the upper facade; the windows look like gaping holes without the mullions.

The copper cornice is in good condition. A few minor dents do not seem to have affected it much.

Moving inside, the theater lobby is in good condition. One major change has been the addition of acoustical ceiling tile. Unfortunately, this has been painted, thereby negating to a great extent any acoustical property it may have possessed.



Figure 20
The facade today. Note the new marquee.
Photo: David Harrington, 1985

The brick and terra cotta tile have become stained; dust from the atmosphere and oil and dirt from thousands of hands have had a discoloring effect.

The main auditorium has seen many changes. The walls no longer have their woven coverings; the famous Edith Emerson murals hang in their place. The woodwork and plaster pilasters were once stained a dark color but have been painted white with gold accents. The seats are not original to the theater; evidence of this can be seen on the floor and in early photographs.

The screen shielding the orchestra pit from the audience is no longer the turned balustrade it once was; a gold velvet curtain hung on a brass rail and plastic pipe has taken its place. New fire exit doors have replaced the originals on the sides of the auditorium. These, however, are behind the portiers. [Figures 21, 22, 23 and 24]

Speakers have been hung on the pilasters to the left and right of the stage, breaking the line of the pilaster. Steel piping has been attached to the wall between the paired pilasters for the purpose of hanging theatrical spotlights. Depending on the needs of the show, there can be quite a conglomeration of lighting hung from these pipes.

A problem has also arisen in relation to the placement of these lights. When changing or adjusting them, the most

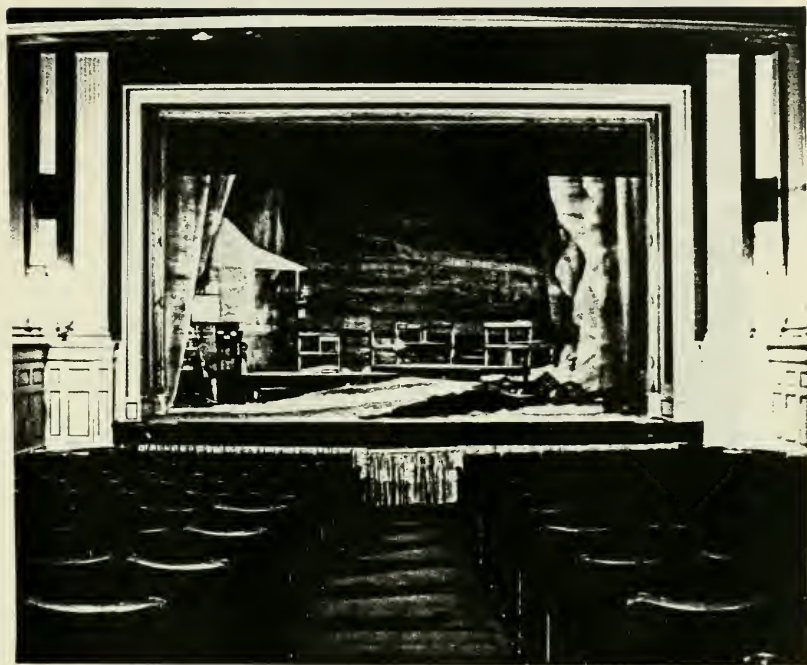


Figure 21

The auditorium today. Note the curtain in front of the orchestra pit and speakers hung on pilasters.

Photo: David Harrington, 1985

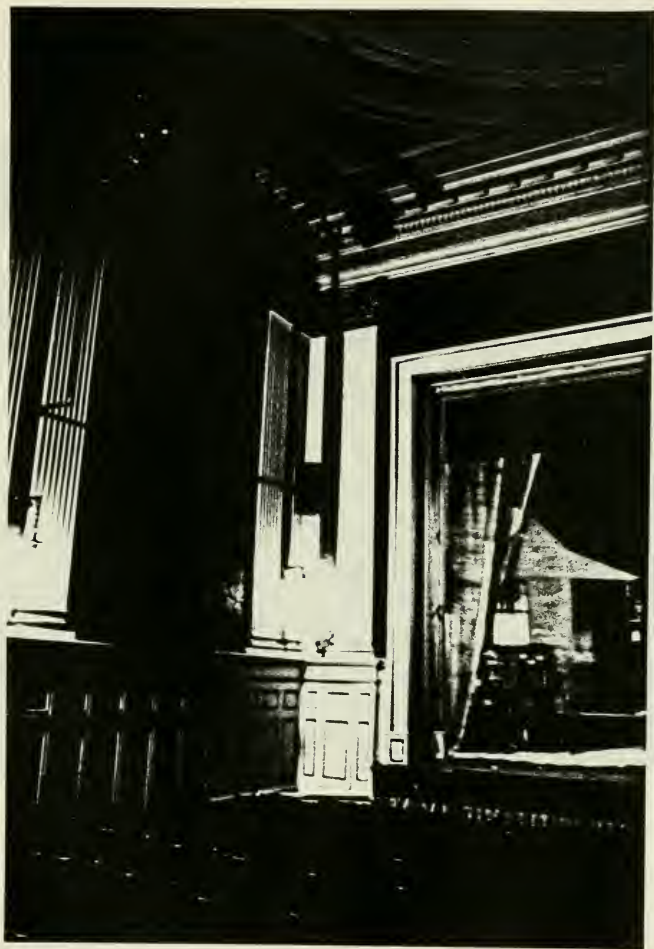


Figure 22

Auditorium detail. Note the pipe supporting stage lighting between the pilasters.

Photo: David Harrington, 1985



Figure 23
Auditorium from stage.
Photo: David Harrington, 1985



Figure 24
Auditorium looking from stage toward balcony
Photo: David Harrington, 1985

convenient place to rest the ladder is on the fragile plaster capitals of the pilasters, thereby breaking them. This is also true of the plaster frieze above. [Figure 25] Stage lighting has also been placed on the balcony railing, puncturing and denting it.

The Edith Emerson murals are in need of professional conservation. Blackened with age and grime, they are virtually impossible to photograph. They are also coming off the wall. This could indicate several problems: leaking roof, deteriorated plaster beneath the murals, or failure of the attachment mechanism.

Several of the ribbed glass globes on the lighting fixtures are missing, and have been replaced with plain globes.

Modern safety emergency lighting have been placed over the exit doors, detracting from the architectural details.

The second floor foyer is much the same as it originally was. New carpeting has replaced the old floor covering. Years of paint and cigarette smoke have stained the walls and blurred any fine detail in the woodwork. The plaster is cracked in some spots, but is intact. The ceiling lighting fixtures are partially original; the glass pendant shades are missing but the hardware is in place. A storage closet has been added to the foyer in the northwest corner. It is

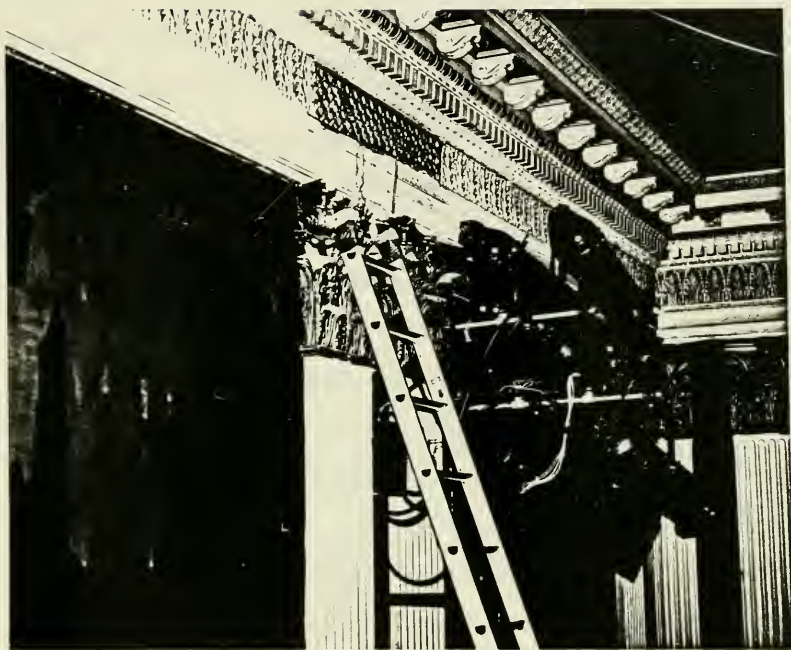


Figure 25

Ladder placement on pilaster capital. Note broken plaster on capital and frieze above. Also note intrusion of stage lighting.

Photo: David Harrington, 1985

of a temporary nature and could be removed easily. The projection booth located at the rear of the balcony is also used for a storage area. The current use does not affect the space adversely.

The balcony has undergone the same changes as have occurred with the orchestra level. The seats have been replaced and carpeting changed. The gallery in front of the front row seats has been worn by people's feet resting on it. The paint has protected the surface somewhat, acting as a sacrificial layer. The portiers are no longer in place, but the drapery hardware is still there.

The third floor rooms, which were home to Beulah Jay's Metropolitan Dramatic School, now serve as lounge areas, meeting rooms and bar for the Plays and Players organization. The area originally used as a make-up room and ladies rest room has been changed into a small kitchen for the bar and for club functions. There is only one rest room facility on the third floor. The kitchen area was added early on in the building's history; the white tiled walls, heavy enameled sink and glass fronted cabinets are typical of early twentieth-century kitchens. The woodwork has been painted throughout. Investigation proved fruitful, however; the woodwork was originally stained dark and varnished. Physical evidence indicates this fact, as does a circa 1937 photograph. [Figures 26 and 27]



Figure 26
The clubroom, c.1937
Photograph courtesy of Plays and Players



Figure 27
The clubroom today
Photo: David Harrington, 1985

Figure 26 is interesting in many respects. The main club room is shown, wicker furniture, a baby grand piano, lamps and oriental carpet give the scene a domestic look. Paintings and photographs hang on the wall; these are still in possession of Plays and Players. Big checked curtains with flat matching valances hang in the windows. A portier of the same fabric hangs in the foreground of the photograph. The room is much the same as it was in the photograph. An acoustical tile ceiling was put over the smooth plaster ceiling. Time and paint have taken their toll on the plaster walls.

The bar area, once used as the classroom for Beulah Jay's school, has seen many changes, mostly of a cosmetic nature. The walls have been covered with a wood grained masonite paneling and the woodwork has been painted innumerable times, obscuring molding profiles. The floors have been carpeted.

The two front lounge rooms with their overstuffed chairs and bookcases are the most homey of all the rooms. Like the other rooms, woodwork has been painted and floors carpeted. [Figure 28]

From the lounge and bar areas, once can go to a fire escape to the roof. According to the custodian, the roof is in sound condition; no leaks have been detected, and this



Figure 28

Lounge rooms, third floor. Note the pocket doors. Woodwork has been painted.

Photo: David Harrington, 1985

investigator saw no evidence of water entry into the building. There are, however, some areas which could prove troublesome as time goes on.

The terra cotta coping on the parapet wall has become loose in some places and lost its mortar. The chimney is noticeably out of plumb, its stuccoed finish cracked and spalling. The copper cornice has been patched with a tar-roofing compound. This temporary patching might prove to be ineffective as time goes on given the different properties of tar and copper. Some of the brick has lost its mortar. The bricks are in good shape; there is no evidence of spalling or cracking.

Plays and Players stands at a junction in relation to its building. The organization is enjoying some financial reward from renting its facility to outside groups. Since Plays and Players is a non-profit organization, any monies realized from the rentals go back into the organization. The recent drive to raise money for air-conditioning has proven the strength of the organization and the community's commitment to the theater. The hope is that with air conditioning, the theater will be used year round.

With year round use and itinerant theater groups coming and going, the building is bound to suffer from harder and more frequent use.

Preservation issues for the Plays and Players Theatre can be broken down into two parts; those concerns which are maintenance related, the day-to-day operations, and larger, long-term preservation issues. The daily concerns are perhaps the most important. The issue of theater technicians defacing the property is one that could be dealt with immediately, and at no initial cost. Setting up stage lighting is a problem. Either the murals get torn by ladders, or pilaster capitals crushed. A simple solution would be the use of temporary scaffolding for this purpose. The scaffolding would also come in handy when it came time to change the light bulbs in the auditorium fixtures. There is now no provision for this activity.

The setting up a stage, and taking a set down can be a complicated task indeed. Technicians and maintenance personnel need to be made aware of the fragile nature of the property they are dealing with.

Some of the long term projects would be those requiring more money to accomplish. The facade restoration would include restoring the marquee to its original configuration, cleaning the masonry, cleaning and repairing the terra cotta frieze, restoring the windows to their original nine-over-one configuration, and repairing the copper cornice. This could be done as a separate and special project, with donors giving for a special project.

The lobby restoration would include: cleaning all masonry surfaces, determining original paint colors and painting accordingly, removing acoustical tile from the ceiling and repairing or replacing the plaster ceiling beneath.

The auditorium would require quite a lot of restoration, but this too could be accomplished in stages. The murals need to be restored by a professional art conservator familiar with mural restoration, as this task would be far too complicated and risky for an amateur. The murals are one of the building's outstanding and most important features and should be treated as such. The issue of lighting the murals need only be addressed after cleaning to determine the proper amount of light.

The paint colors could remain, or tests could be done to determine what colors have been used in the past. The photographs of the theater's original interior and documentary sources indicate a dark, stained wood. A thorough paint analysis would reveal the original colors and could be replicated easily. The analysis would include the ceiling and plaster frieze. The speakers on either side of the stage could be placed in a more discrete position, perhaps near the orchestra pit.

The stage curtain could be replaced with one that matched the original. A fuller drape to the curtain would look more appropriate. The auditorium seats could be replaced in a design that was sympathetic to the original seating configuration. Also, the seating and new curtain should be harmonious in color with the paint colors. All portiers should be replaced to match the new stage curtain. The carpeting should also harmonize with the rest of the interior.

The orchestra pit balustrade with its turned elements could be replaced. The ribbed glass lighting globes could be reproduced. A glass manufacturer would have to do a special order, and the theater might want to keep several extras on hand in case of breakage.

The emergency exit lighting over the doors, while necessary, is unsympathetic to the architectural details around them. Perhaps a less obtrusive emergency lighting system could be devised for these exit lights.

The second floor foyer needs to have the plaster repaired where needed, and the woodwork painted and restored. Again, a paint analysis would determine the original colors of this space. The lighting fixtures should be restored.

The third floor club rooms should be treated in a manner sympathetic to the architectural details, but also in a way which addresses the club's need for a lounge area and

reception room. These rooms are subject to hard use. Alcohol stains on wood surfaces, cigarette burns on the floor and so on make this a problem area.

The bar should have its paneling removed and be painted. Acoustical tiles should be removed and the plaster ceiling repaired. The kitchen area needs to be redesigned if it is to serve as a functioning kitchen.

The third floor as a whole needs to be treated as one space. Some contemporary furnishings and curtains would not be objectionable as long as the basic architectural integrity of the space were respected, i.e. windows, doors, moldings, etc.

The basement dressing rooms, shop, and Green Room need an overhaul. These spaces are of little historical interest, except for the Green Room. As it stands, the Green Room is an uninviting place to be. By exposing the wood paneling, and perhaps restoring its color, it would be a pleasant place to meet actors after a show. The dressing rooms could be redone entirely. Storage is a big problem in the basement. Some reorganization of storage areas, and replanning of the basement would alleviate this problem. By judiciously using the basement area, much storage space would be gained.

Plays and Players possesses one of the finest small theaters in the region. Its historical significance, both to social historians and architectural historians, has been demonstrated. Its inclusion on both the State and National Registers is a testimony to its significance.

The theater is one of the few theaters in the city that has remained relatively intact. The Shubert and the Walnut Street theaters have been extensively altered. Philadelphia, which once boasted of 45 theaters, currently has five in the center city area. The fact that Plays and Players has survived is remarkable in itself.

What changes have occurred have happened slowly. They are almost unnoticed when they occur, yet the accumulation of insensitive intrusions has had a detrimental effect. Like so many coats of paint, at first the change is different and perhaps refreshing, until, after layer upon layer of paint, the original is obscured. The building has not been treated with loving care at all times. Theater technicians have marred surfaces for the purposes of their art. Club members have not always been willing to spend money where it was needed. What has been lacking at Plays and Players was an overall scheme, a common goal towards which all the members moved. Interest has been expressed in doing something to the building, yet nothing is ever done. The one exception to this is the upcoming installation of air-condition-

ing. This will provide an extended season for the theater, and therefore added revenue. Even with this change, though, the building fabric could suffer unless the installation is sensitive to the historic building fabric. Again, the members need a common goal, a preservation outlook, to weigh their decisions against. A complacent attitude of "it can't be done any other way" cannot be adopted. The Plays and Players organization prides itself on being the oldest repertory group in the country, and they are proud of their theater being listed on the National Register of Historic Places. This distinction, however, carries a certain amount of responsibility too.

Financially, the theater is doing better than it has in past years. Renting out the theater has helped enormously. The membership could take steps to secure more financial backing for future preservation projects. There are currently 325 members in Plays and Players. At one time the membership was upwards of one thousand. A membership drive aimed at a new audience would increase club activities and financial support.

The facility could once again be used for acting classes, again providing additional revenue for the organization, as well as be of service to the community. This type of program would be an outreach to the city, and make

people aware of what the group stands for and supports.

The building stands as a monument to those who built it, who acted in it, and who enjoyed its amusements. It is a rarity in that it is perhaps the only theater left standing designed by Amos Barnes. The Forrest Theater at Broad and Sansom was torn down, as was his Dixie Theater in the Manayunk section of Philadelphia. This theater is a survivor. Now is time for it to be treated with special care and more loving attention.

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APPENDIX ONE

WALL DECORATIONS IN THE THEATRE OF PLAYS AND PLAYERS BY EDITH EMERSON

The theme is the Legend of Dionysos, chosen because the Dionysiae Festivals in ancient Greece were the origin of the Drama in Europe. They had a mystical religious nature expressed in poetry, music and dancing. On the Balcony panels are quotations from "The Bacchae" of Euripedes as translated by Sir Gilbert Murray, which convey the ecstasy inspired by the God of the Vine.

Panel 1. (Next to stage on audience right) The Athenian Tribute, seven men and seven maidens, arrives at the Place of Minos in Crete, headed by Theseus, the King's son who intends to rescue his country from this annual humiliation.

Panel 2. (Next to Panel 1.) The Labyrinth with the monstrous Minotaur watching for new victims. In the lower right corner Ariadne, daughter of the Cretan King Minos, gives the Athenian Prince a ball of thread to enable him to find his way out after his battle with the Minotaur.

In actual fact the Labyrinth was the many chambered construction of the palace whose architect was Daedalus, and the chief sport was bull fighting. Extant frescoes show both male and female acrobats summersaulting over charging bulls. The tall proportions of these panels led me to adopt a composition reminiscent of Chinese landscape painting and to keep the figures small so that they would not compete with actors on the stage.

Panel 3. (Audience left furthest from stage) Theseus and Ariadne escape with his companions by ship forgetting in their haste to lower the black sail and replace it with a white one, as Theseus had promised his father Aegeus he would do if his enterprise had been successful. When the old king saw the black sail he plunged into the sea in despair and drowned so that Theseus became King when he returned to Athens.

- Panel 4. (Audience left next to stage) Before that he was storm-driven on the island of Naxos where he basely abandoned Ariadne, leaving her asleep. His excuse was that he was commanded by the Gods to do so. However the goddess Aphrodite and the god Dionysos found her so she exchanged her earthly lover for a celestial one and beame his bride.
- Panel 5. (Above the stage) The marriage procession of Dionysos and Ariadne riding in his leopard drawn vehicle and attended by his train of satyrs, fawns and Maenads or Bacchantes.

There are also decorative maps of Greece and Crete in the Balcony.

Document on file with Plays and Players.

APPENDIX TWO

From Building History Record, Building Inspection Section,
Department of Licenses and Inspection, City of Philadelphia

18 July, 1912

Application for erection of new buildings

Plan no. 1293

Permit no. 5464

Dramatic school, first class fireproof

1712-14-16 Delancey Street

feet from front 47' x 48, 92' 3-1/2" deep

3 story - one story stage

front

Height 43' 0" Back 50' 0"

Basement 11' 6" 1st 14' 2nd 13' 6" 3rd 12' 6"

Stone footing 36" + 12"

Foundation wall thickness, 22"

Upper walls 18" + 3"

Construction: brick

Composition of mortar: 1-3 cement and sand mortar - upper
walls - 1 cement, 3 sand + lime

Roofing: reinforced concrete slab covered with 4-ply slag

Trap door to roof

Copper cornice

Brick supporting walls, steel beams, fireproofed reinforced
concrete floor slabs

Site being razed

Owner: B.E. Jay, Colonial Theatre Building

Architect: Amos W. Barnes, 130 S. 15th Street

Contractor: Fred A. Havens and Company, 845 N. 19th Street

APPENDIX THREE

From Building History Record, Building Inspection Section,
Department of Licenses and Inspection, City of Philadelphia

October 13, 1954
Permit No. 8602

Removing marquee 7' x 14' over front pavement

Contractor: Frank W. Taylor and Son, 259 S. 4th Street

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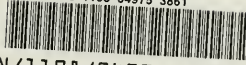
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